

From Confusion to Self-discovery in *Brave Enough* by Kati Gardner: An Exploration of Identity Formation through Marcia's Identity Status Theory

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Abstract— *Young Adult Fiction often addresses societal issues that are relevant to adolescent readers. These books' appeal lies in their ability to resonate with young adults by tackling themes of identity, self-discovery, and growth. These themes are often explored within the context of challenging experiences such as chronic illness. This research paper examines Brave Enough by Kati Gardner, which emphasises resilience, hope, and the power of human connections. James Marcia's Identity Status Theory is used for a detailed analysis of the characters Cason and Davis. It offers a structured approach to examine the characters as they confront and navigate their identities amidst their struggles with cancer and addiction. This research paper highlights their development from confusion and exploration to a more defined and integrated sense of self. Thematic analysis is done to explore the characters' journeys and their reflection on a broader theme of identity formation.*



Keywords— *Identity status, identity formation, cancer, addiction, young adult fiction.*

The study of popular culture in literature is an expanding area that looks at current societal issues through new genres, interdisciplinary studies, and creative approaches in literary analysis. It focuses on books that are widely read and are enjoyed, and are known for being accessible and relevant to today's trends. This includes best-selling fiction and works that reflect modern cultural trends. "Popular culture is the television we watch, the cinema we give patronage to, the type of food... we eat, the type of attire we wear, the music we appreciate, the things we spend money on, in short, the whole society we live in." (*What is Popular Literature?* 7,8). In popular culture, Young Adult Fiction mostly focuses on young adults between the ages of twelve and eighteen. Young adult readers find these books interesting and relatable because they address issues relevant to their own lives. Adolescence is a phase everyone goes through, and it can be problematic if someone gets stuck in it. Young adult books are mostly based on "change

and growth" (Cadden 310). These books offer young adult readers a chance to explore this stage of life. It helps them navigate challenges and also encourages growth and self-discovery. "The burden of adolescent literature has always been to achieve synchronicity with the concerns of an audience that is defined by its state of flux and impermanence" (Coats 325). Thus, it reflects and resonates with their shifting experiences and emotions. These books cover a wide range of genres, including mystery, romance, illness, diaries, fantasy, horror, and adventure.

The use of illness in young adult fiction is getting wider. These stories help readers develop empathy for those with illnesses and provide a deeper understanding of various types of illnesses. Young adult cancer fiction often shows characters going through significant changes as they deal with illness and treatment. These stories focus on the formation of their identities, reevaluating their sense of self,

maintaining relationships and goals, and experiencing moments of growth and self-discovery while facing challenges. *Brave Enough* by Kati Gardner is a young adult cancer fiction that focuses on themes of resilience, hope, and the strength of human connections. It highlights the importance of tackling personal challenges and the support of the community. This ultimately shows that courage and hope can be found even in tough times. This research paper focuses on the characters, Cason and Davis and analyses the different stages of identity formation they go through.

Brave Enough falls under the genre of illness narrative. The author, Kati Gardner, is not only a writer and actor but also a childhood cancer survivor who has had her left leg amputated. The story revolves around two main characters, Cason Martin and Davis Channing. Cason is a talented young ballerina at the Atlanta Ballet Conservatory. During an audition for the American Ballet Theatre, she suffers a leg fracture and discovers she has an aggressive form of cancer called Ewing's Sarcoma, which leads to the amputation of her leg. Davis is a cancer survivor and a former drug addict struggling to maintain his sobriety. After his trial for possessing controlled substances, he was sentenced to complete three hundred hours of community service at the oncology unit of the children's hospital. There, he meets Cason, and the two quickly form a bond. As Cason undergoes treatment, Davis provides emotional support, understanding her struggles due to his own experiences. Other key characters include Natali Martin, Cason's mother, who appears strict and demanding, but is later revealed to have a kind and sensitive side. Additionally, characters like Jase, Mari, Noah, Paige, and Mary Faith are fellow cancer survivors. They help Cason come to terms with her new life after amputation, and Davis to overcome his addiction. Amid the emotional turmoil, physical challenges, and mental stress, the narrative emphasises the critical support of friends, family, and healthcare professionals to the main characters.

This research paper hypothesises that *Brave Enough* portrays a nuanced journey of its young adult protagonists, offering insight into the complex process of the formation of their identity amidst their experiences with cancer and addiction.

Despite the increasing focus on young adult literature that addresses cancer, there is a noticeable absence of analysis on *Brave Enough* by Kati Gardner. This gap in the literature presents an opportunity to explore the identity formation of adolescents among the challenges of cancer in greater depth using Marcia's Identity Status Theory. This research not only contributes to the understanding of identity formation in young adult cancer fiction but also

introduces *Brave Enough* as a significant text worthy of scholarly consideration.

James Marcia's Identity Status Theory is applied to analyse the impact of Cason and Davis's experiences with cancer on their journey toward developing their identities. In the book *Ego Identity: A Handbook for Psychosocial Research*, under the chapter "The Ego Identity Status Approach to Ego Identity", Marcia expands on Erik Erikson's idea of the identity crisis and defines four variants in resolving the identity issue in adolescents. They are identity diffusion, foreclosure, moratorium, and identity achievement. The four identity statuses are ways in which a teenager might find to deal with the identity issue. Identity diffusion is the first status, where adolescents have neither explored nor committed to any identity. This leads them to drift through life without clear goals or direction. The second status is identity foreclosure, where adolescents commit to an identity without exploration by accepting the values and beliefs passed down by their family and culture without questioning or considering alternatives. Moratorium is the third status, where adolescents actively explore different values and beliefs but have not yet committed to a specific identity. They keep their options open as they navigate an identity crisis. The final status is identity achievement, where adolescents have explored and have committed to a set of values, beliefs, and life goals. They feel confident in the choices they make. By applying Marcia's Identity Status Theory, the researcher conducts a thematic analysis specifically on the theme of identity formation to explore Cason's and Davis's identity formation amongst the challenges of cancer and recovery.

Cason falls under the latter three identity statuses. The second status is identity foreclosure, where a person makes strong commitments to certain roles or values. This identity is often shaped by external influences, including family and society. At the beginning of the book, Cason exhibits identity foreclosure. Her identity as a ballerina is influenced by her mother, Natalie, who is her rigid instructor. Even when she has a deadly pain, she is ready to perform in the audition. Cason refuses to acknowledge the pain. These lines highlight Cason's desperation and dedication to dance: "Bubbles of heat pulsed through the tendons around her hip...More burning, blinding in a way she hadn't thought possible" (Gardner 13). She keeps dancing till the end of the performance.

Regardless of her mother's impact, her identity is closely tied to her career as a ballerina. Her dedication to becoming a professional dancer is strong, and she follows this path without exploring other possibilities. This is highlighted in the following lines: "Cason was desperate to get into the Studio Company as her mother was...She would

spend her days dancing and dancing, surrounded by people who understood the release of landing the perfect *grand jete*" (Gardner 10). Cason experiences moments of identity foreclosure during her journey, particularly when she clings to her identity as a dancer. However, this foreclosure is challenged by her cancer, which makes her re-evaluate and think beyond her initial commitments.

When she is diagnosed with cancer and cannot walk, it threatens her identity as a ballerina and also her career. This leads to a crisis where she has to decide if her previous commitments are still relevant. It leads to the next status, that is, identity moratorium, where an individual is in the midst of a crisis, exploring different options and ideas, but has not yet settled on a clear direction or commitment. While playing cards with her child life specialist, Heather, Cason mentions that when she thinks about dance, she finds it hard to breathe. She goes on and says, "I didn't just dance. It's who I am...Who I was" (Gardner 54). There are similar instances where Cason finds it hard to come to terms with her new identity. For instance, while talking to her mother, she cries, "how can I dance when I have cancer and my leg is in a brace...?... This is not supposed to be my life" (Gardner 73). Her identity, which has been strongly tied to ballet, is questioned, and this triggers the start of an identity crisis in her.

She explores various aspects of herself beyond ballet, including her personal values, relationships, and future goals. When she is hospitalized she meets Mari, a cancer survivor and an amputee. Cason is amazed by Mari's ability to make amputation and adjusting to life afterwards look so easy. After bonding with Davis, Mari and Heather, Cason has a different perspective on her life. She starts to explore her new life as a cancer survivor and amputee. This period of exploration is marked by uncertainty as she tries to find a new sense of self among the challenges of cancer. An instance when Cason mentions that she can become a camp counsellor in the future reveals her exploration of other potential career paths. Subsequently, she gains autonomy when she decides to shave her head. During this stage, she gets help from her health professionals and fellow cancer survivors. The communication she has with them impacts the status of her identity formation.

Davis offers her emotional support throughout her treatment. He shows an optimistic view of her new life. After her left leg is amputated, Cason's little hope of becoming a dancer has been shattered. At this point, Mari has been a strong motivator for Cason. She helps Cason navigate life after amputation through her own experiences. Her physical therapist, Kelsey, encourages her to stay determined to become a dancer, even though Cason is reluctant to discuss dance, especially given her current

physical condition. There are moments when she has to confront the reality of her amputation and feels frustrated by accepting it. With the help of Kelsey, she starts to dance again despite her disability. Though Cason did not seem to be excited at her sessions with Kelsey, "Climbing even just a foot or two off the ground had been exhilarating. And she wanted to do it again" (Gardner 238). When she is asked to perform in Camp Chemo, Cason's history as a professional ballerina and her thoughts about being an inspiring dancer to others show her ongoing struggle to balance her past identity with her current challenges. Nevertheless, the relationships she has formed in the hospital with Heather, Kelsey and Dr. Henderson help her to come to terms with her new identity.

The final status is identity achievement, where a person has gone through a period of exploration and has made a commitment to their values, goals and roles. Cason, after exploring different aspects of her identity and facing the challenges of cancer, starts to integrate her experiences into a stable sense of self. During her time in the cancer camp, she observes other campers being energetic and having no primary thought or focus on their cancer. She actively takes part in all the camp activities and games. She loves it at camp. When she slips at the pool and gets hurt, she responds with, "I'm going to make Kelsey teach me how to fall correctly." (Gardner 278). At this point, she has started to accept her new self. Despite this, she is not ready to dance when Kelsey brings it up. After Kelsey mentions that it is important to remember that Cason has the "heart of a dancer" (Gardner 280), she realises that "Her dancer's heart hadn't been amputated, just her leg" (Gardner 280).

When Cason is asked about her goal, she initially responds by saying she just wants to finish chemo. Her friends Mari, Page, and Tiny suggest other possibilities beyond her immediate reality. When they question further about her dreams, she finally admits, "To dance" (Gardner 291). This marks the moment she accepts that, as Mari suggested, she can still be a dancer even without a leg. After bravely performing her silk dance in front of a few young campers, Cason feels emotionally fulfilled and motivated by the realisation that she has inspired the children. During her final performance in front of all the campers, she feels truly alive, "lost in the world she had so desperately missed" (Gardner 308). Since her left leg has been amputated, she has been questioning her worth and goals as a dancer. After her performance at the camp, she finds new ways to define her worth and future and redefines her goals as a dancer.

Her commitment to ballet and to get recognition from her mother has been a valued part of her identity. Holding on to it leads to identity foreclosure. Cason's transition to identity moratorium happens when she reflects

on her values, interests, and goals. She is in the midst of a personal crisis, trying to understand her new identity and her future. By the end of the novel, Cason reaches a state of identity achievement. After a period of exploration and self-reflection, she comes to a well-defined sense of self. She finds new ways to connect with her passions and goals. She embraces a broader sense of who she is and what she can contribute.

In contrast to Cason's journey, Davis's path is defined by his battles with addiction and recovery, which significantly shape his identity. Throughout the novel, Davis undergoes considerable evolution as he confronts his struggles with cancer, addiction, and the search for a new sense of purpose. Initially, Davis is in a state of identity foreclosure, where his commitment to overcoming addiction and finding a new direction is heavily influenced by the expectations of his family, healthcare professionals, and his moral obligation. When he has been assigned community service at the hospital where he is treated, Davis feels a deep sense of guilt. He knows the hardships his loved ones have to go through and feels that he has disappointed them. The expectations that are placed on him reinforce his identity foreclosure. For instance, Dr. Henderson's remark, "Davis, I'm really happy to see the progress you've made" (Gardner 37). This ongoing pressure from those around him initially prevents him from exploring other aspects of his identity, yet it also sets the stage for his eventual growth and transformation. It also helps him to stay sober. He is focused on the idea of redemption and living up to the role of someone who has overcome his past issues.

As the narrative suggests, Davis's efforts to stay sober mark the early stages of his identity development. His progression into identity moratorium reveals his struggle with multiple aspects of his identity, including being a cancer survivor and a recovering drug addict. This phase is marked by intense self-reflection and a questioning of his prior commitments and roles. When Davis encounters his old friends, Alexis and Ethan, he is reminded of his past as an addict. It leads to significant anxiety. The NA meeting with them triggers strong urges to relapse, highlighting the fragility of his sobriety.

Davis often experiences the need to get high during stressful or uncomfortable situations. For instance, when he meets his ex-girlfriend Alexis and Ethan, who supplies him with drugs, he feels an overwhelming urge to get high. This urge intensifies when he visits Detective Avery to report Ethan for assault. He even senses the taste of drugs in his mouth. Similarly, when Alexis emails him, admitting she cannot be helped, and Cason faces serious vascular issues simultaneously, Davis is traumatised and nearly succumbs to his addiction. He manages to resist by reaching out to his

sponsor, John, who offers guidance and support. The situation worsens when Alexis dies, and Davis blames himself for introducing her to drugs. His guilt and helplessness become so overwhelming that he is once again desperate to use drugs.

Despite the temptation, Davis understands that going back to his old ways is wrong and frightening, yet staying sober is equally challenging. This internal conflict is evident when the narrative states, "Now he was sober because he wanted to be...He would reclaim himself. He would deal with life as it came at him" (Gardner 65). Although the thoughts of using drugs, like "Just one hit...No one has to know" (Gardner 48) and "Just. One. More. Time" (Gardner 68), persist, Davis remains committed to sobriety. The physical and emotional pain he endures is described as: "A physical ache punched into his stomach, pushing his diaphragm up, making it impossible for him to breathe. It was always like this, no warning and often very little reason why, but he was desperate to get high" (Gardner 45, 46). During these challenging moments, his friend Jase plays a crucial role in keeping him grounded and focused on the present.

Davis's interactions with Cason and his experiences throughout the novel make him deeply reflect on his identity and values. This facilitates his transition from identity foreclosure to moratorium. As he learns more about Cason's struggles, Davis begins to confront his unresolved issues. He often grapples with feelings of self-criticism due to his past. When he is assaulted by Ethan, it is Cason who encourages him to file a case, as Davis initially believes that his words will not be trusted. The echoing thought, "I shouldn't be here...I deserved it" (Gardner 111), reveals his deep-seated guilt and self-doubt.

Davis's battle is not just with his addiction, but also with his own body and mind. Controlling his thoughts and actions to stay off drugs is an ongoing struggle. He finds this even more challenging than battling cancer. However, with constant reminders from Dr. Henderson about the strength he has shown in overcoming cancer, and the unwavering support of his mother and loved ones, Davis pushes through these dark thoughts and maintains his sobriety.

By the end of the novel, Davis reaches a point of identity achievement, successfully integrating his past experiences with addiction and cancer into a more positive sense of self. His journey involves accepting his past, acknowledging the personal growth he has undergone, and committing to a future that aligns with his true self and values. Davis learns to balance his past struggles with his present, making firm commitments to new goals and relationships that reflect his growth.

A significant moment in Davis's journey occurs during a conversation with Noah and Jase, where they discuss how it takes courage to choose the harder path. For the first time, Davis feels genuinely proud of his sobriety. Another critical moment occurs when Davis is on the verge of relapsing. At this point of weakness, Margaret, the director of Camp Chemo, calls him to inform him that he has been chosen to light the camp's first campfire. Margaret also reminds him that he is a fighter. Her words help Davis realise his worth and recall the challenges he has overcome to reach this point. He understands that his addiction does not define him and it is "just one of his layers" (Gardner 260). Davis's struggle with self-identity diminishes as he sees the pride and support of those around him. He feels immense gratitude towards his health professionals, Camp Chemo, and his loved ones. On the last day of camp, he tells Cason, "I wander sometimes, but I'm not lost" (Gardner 304), recognising the challenges of staying sober while also reinforcing his commitment. The camp gives him the clarity and motivation to continue on his path of sobriety. It reinforces his sense of purpose and identity.

Cason's and Davis's evolution in *Brave Enough* illustrates a journey from identity foreclosure and moratorium to identity achievement. Cason's experience with cancer leads to a period of intense self-exploration and redefinition. Throughout the novel, Cason reevaluates her goals and aspirations, moving beyond her initial focus on ballet. This reevaluation is a key aspect of her transition from foreclosure to achievement. Davis's development involves a crucial period of exploration and self-reflection, leading to a more authentic and integrated sense of self. Both Cason and Davis navigate their identity challenges and explore new possibilities. They evolve through different identity statuses and achieve a well-defined sense of self. Their journeys demonstrate that difficult experiences can lead to significant personal growth, allowing them to create new identities that honour their pasts while looking ahead to the future.

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